INDIANA Collection-Griffith-History GRIFFITH HISTORY

"The Town that Came to the Tracks"

Before I begin, may I say that I am not an authority on the History of Griffith. But I have discovered some things about our town because of a project that started quite innocently and then grew like Topsy. Last year the garden clubs were planning a flower show around the theme of Our Town and decided we needed to have some information about early Griffith. That sounded like an easy assignment so I volunteered to go to the library to see what I could find. I found nothing in any book or anyplace else that Mrs. Carson knew about, except one very interesting and puzzling letter. It had been written at the request of Sam Woods, in 1949, by an early resident of town named Peter Young, who was then about 90 years old. It was interesting because he recounted some things he could remember about early Griffith, but puzzling because he named many buildings and streets that I had never heard of.

I asked Ruth Waller to help me locate these places and to check his story and we started on a hunt that was to lead us into many interesting and amusing situations. The trail led first to our town hall where the records don't start til 1904; then to the Crown Point surveror's office in search of an early map which we didn't find; then back to the Griffith station where a chance conversation about old buildings reminded one of the men of a dusty old map that had been behind the desk for years. He hauled it out and gave it to us and I can't say we were to anxious to carry it home with it's thick coat of dust, but it was a little like finding buried treasure. We think it was drawn around 1910 and if so is the earliest map we've seen. (They sent us to Franks at Margarets).

Griffith Library started in 1915.

Then we searched the old files of the Hammond Times and papers in the Gary library. They are all on microfilm and viewed on a machine which is rather difficult to focus. After scanning old gossip columns and farm reports for a while we felt like we should turn in a bill for new glasses. On book in the Gary library (written in 1900) yielded a brief general paragraph about Griffith, but that was all. I know it was short because I copied it while holding a very noisy baby in one arm while the research librarian glared at me. You'd be surprised at how many people were studying in there in dead silence before I came in. Incidentally, the new book The Calumet Region by Powell Moore doesn't do much better, devoting only one page out of 600 to a brief statement about Griffith.

Next we began to talk with people who had lived in Griffith a long time and here we were lucky for many people were generous with their information. One woman lent us her scrapbooks from which we collected a wealth of material. From another we got an 1899 copy of the Ladies Home Journal, which though not very pertinent, was wonderful for its 60 year old advertising and household hints. But she also had a memorandum which her father had written down some 19 years ago about the beginnings of the town. It had been written on a gray shirt carboard and had been stuck in a drawer all these years. How we strained our eyes trying to decipher that one. Some helpful information was gained by reading some of the property abstracts. If you have one, sit down and read it clear through and you may be amazed at what you find.

This is how we collected the pieces. Actually, we didn't

try to put them together more than just generally for we are sure that there are many things that we do not know, and probably errors in what we did uncover. This is a part of the story of the "Town That Came to the Tracks."

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By: Marge Tovey

In the year 1833, 17 years after Indiana had become a state, the first white men were exploring the possibilities of settling in Lake County. If we could have stood with one of them on the high ground just south of Route 30, we might have heard him mutter "All that land to the north is nothing but swamp. It'll probably never amount to anything." Yet, nearly 60 years later a smooth promoter was advertising some of that same land as "healthy, high and pleasant, fully 40 feet above the lake." The story of what happened in those 60 years is the beginning of the story of the growth of the Calumet Region and specifically for us, of Griffith. For the first man who thought it "would never amount to anything" was wrong, and the promoter was right—although some of you who live in certain parts of town may have some doubts about how high and dry you are in the springtime.

Let me describe briefly the physical properties of our area, so that we can see what happened to that swamp. When the last glacier receded to the north, the weight of the ice carved out some natural hollows and ridges in the land that held water and formed small lakes, which later became swamps. We know them more familiarly as the ridges formed at Route 30 and Ridge Road. The area lying between these two ridges is what we are concerned with. One of the early settlers named

Jack Cady found a high spot to settle on and the marsh in our area bears his name. For a long time the regular means of travel between Munster or Highland and Merrilville was by boat.

In 1850 Congress ceded what were regarded as "swamp lands" to the states in which they were located. The provisions made were that the money from the lands (\$1.25 an acre) were to be used to "reclaim the lands by means of levees and drains". The Cady Marsh was reclaimed mainly through the efforts of a man named Hart. He bought up much of the land and then worked for years on the ditch through the ridge at Wicker Park known as Harts Ditch, and then smaller ditches throughout the area. By gradually removing the water and growing crops of hay on the land Hart was able to produce at last vast amounts of fertile farm land.

While the swamp land was being reclaimed, railroads were being built across the area. Five of them chanced to cross in one spot and this eventually gave out town its reason for being. In 1884 Peter Young bought an acre of land just to the south of where Margaret's Restuarant is now. He worked on the railroad and intended to live close to his work. Within the next two years he was joined by John Miller to the north with his Sample Room (Tavern) and Jake Miller to the south with a shoe and clothing store. The needs of the railroaders were met and all was quiet in this small and nameless community.

Then in 1891 things began to happen. In anticipation that the Chicago World's Fair would bring a tremendous sputt to the growth of Chicago and the outlying districts, two promoters, Jay and Elmer Dwiggins bought up all the farms from

Colfax to ½ mile west on Broad St. and from the tracks north to Elm Street. They laid out a town in lots of 50' each to sell for an average of \$300 apiece. Armed with a fully planned advertising scheme they set out to sell these lots and build a town.

They had named their proposed town Griffith, either for their silent partner, or as one story goes, for the contractors in charge of building the Grand Trunk R.R. However, for awhile they considered calling it Dwiggins Junction—imagine having a return address like that. We found an original sample of the Dwiggins' advertising campaign on a large map with adverising that had been hanging behind the garbage trucks in the street department for years.

"TOWN OF GRIFFITH Chicago's Best FACTORY SUBURB Buy Where There is Sure Growth Ahead

There are no labor unions and no fear of strikes...
Factories are encouraged to locate here...Factories attract
populations rapidly; they make big cities out of small suburbs when the facilities are there. Griffith has them. Buy early
and sell when the town has grown to a city! That's shrewd
investing! You can't afford to miss it."

And on and on with the glowing descriptions ....

The Dwiggins were busy in their efforts to sell their idea. They sold lots sight unseen at the World's Fair, by mail and also by bringing investors and other people out on the railroad on Sundays. At least one lot was sold to a woman in Chicago in exchange for luch tickets at her lunchroom. The Dwiggins probably had their best results with people who didn't actually see the town. They induced factories and businesses to move in and according to Peter Young "buildings went up like mushrooms...They started the Bum factory, moved

in the Williams Wooden Ware, Ricketts Brass factory, Potters Foundry, Rau Lantern Factory, and a few little concerns." Within a year the blocks directly north and south of the tracks on Broad Street (Junction Avenue as it was called) were all built up. We think of the main part of town now as being the portion north of Main Street, but in the beginning there was nothing but a factory or two in that area. Most of the town lay farther south. Across the street from John Miller's Tavern (Margarets) and the Shoe Store was Southworth and Ellis! grocery (gone but the two old houses remain.) To the north of the tracks where Hal Miller's Tap is now was the Beireger Hotel and on up the street, Grimmer's General Store, a Post Office (A.B. Cleaners) the Clemens Bank Building (brick building next to alley) and a hall for dancing on Saturday night and church on Sunday morning (Stop and Shop). There were two schools - North School (Gatlin's Lot) and Troy School (dump).

But Griffith was not slated for fame and fortune and within two years the bubble burst. Probably the panic of '93 was a contributing factor, but more likely than not the Dwiggins discovered that smooth talking was not enough to force a town into growing too rapidly. But by this time they had probably pocketed a tidy sum and as far as we can tell they just disappeared from the scene. The trail becomes rather faint at this point, but most of the property buyers became involved in a series of legal entanglements, and in the process of reading one of the abstracts we discovered that in 1899 the Dwiggins gave their power of attorney to a son Robert, to finish out their business, for they were then living in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Reading between the lines is a natural temptation,

and one wonders about how much money they actually did make on this venture.

After the boom and bust, the majority of people who had swarmed in to town, left as quickly as they had come, leaving a quiet little railroad community once more with some ghostly buildings as mementoes of what might have been. During the next ten years some of the original town's people had faith enough in the future to organize themselves and the town of Griffith was incorporated in 1904. In 1911 the first portion of Franklin School was built. After this a number of more conservative real estate ventures were undertaken and Griffih began to grow at a slow but more healthy rate. Since about 1940 the growth of out town has been fairly rapid, much like other suburban communities.

In closing, let me add this one thing. There is now in the library a folder which includes the material that was compiled by the Garden Clubs last year. It is not in very formal order—most of it being either typewritten copies or material from private parties or photostatic copies. An effort was made to secure a brief history of each of the churches, and that is nearly complete. But the folder is a beginning. Mrs. Carson tells me that the Director of the Libraries is interested in having as much information as possible about out town supplied to the library. It may not be long before some information may no longer be available in some of the older residents are the only ones who have it. If you know of anyone who has pictures, letters, newspaper clippings, etc., urge them to give these things to the library. They will

remain in our library, for probably no one outside of Griffith is interested in them anyway, but at least in the future if your child is sent to look up something about his town, he may be able to find it.

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## GRIFFITH MEMOS

Griffith got its name from a contractor by the name of Griffith, who built the grade for the Grand Trunk R.R. At that time he lived on what now is Main Street,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  mile west of what is now Broad Street. That was the line between St. John Township and North Township.

We (Jamiesons) moved to Griffith in March 1885. At that time there was no road to get up to the depot. A man by the name of Dayton, his wife and sister lived in the Depot and took care of the railroad business. The nearest home at that time was the John Heiny farm on Main Street and across from the Pumping Station. The next house east was the Jake Helfan farm on Colfax and the Jamieson farm was ½ mile north of it located also on Colfax Avenue running south of the Depot. South of Main Street was the Matt Miller farm and north of that was the Schwartz farm, and over in the South East corner was the Beriger farm. North of that was the Troy farm. There was an old building ¼ mile west of the Erie R.R. crossing, which belonged to Dominick Dwark.

Then in 1891 Griffith had a building boom, and built

for about two years. One of the first buildings put up was a big building about 150 feet long on Broad Street which was a factory for wooden ware (wooden butter bowls and chopping bowls). It started at the Bothwells Barber Shop. It never operated.

Then the Griffith Hotel was started by a party by the name of Swalm, and Restaurant, Meat market and Store were built. Two large Lantern Factories were built. The larger was called the Raugh Factory and the smaller the Ricketts Brass Factory.

J. Helf ns was the first pioneer to build a house. An old log house was still standing and being lived in in 1940. It was built before the Civil War.

Memo. by Mr. Jamison
Written down by his
daughter
Mrs. Chas. Hemphill
about 1942

## Miscellaneous Note of Griffith History

Two versions of how Griffith got its name:

I. From a contractor who built the grade for the Grand Trunk R.R. At that time he lived on what is now Main Street, limites west of Broad which was the boundry line between St. John and North Townships.

AII. One of three men from the East who purchased a vast acreage centering about intersection of five railroads which cross Broad Street. D.W. Griffith was one of the promoters.

Griffith was first called Dwiggins Junction; also called New Chicago by Dwiggins.

It was a German settlement of 100 to 150 people before
Dwiggins came into the area in 1891. Some of the earliest
settlers were Jacob Helfen who built a log cabin. In 1884
Peter Young built a house on 1 acre south of the railroad (west
of Broad). In 1885 John Miller built a saloon between Peter
Young and the tracks and in 1886 Jacob Miller built a shoe
store just south of Peter Young.

In November, 1890 an early settler, Jacob Helfen, who owned 80 acres (purchased in 1863) sold several acres (2 half sections and 9 quarters sections) to Elmer Dwiggins for \$8,400. In 1891 Dwiggins Brothers bought all farms from Colfax to \$\frac{1}{2}\$ mile west of Broad and from the Joliet Cut Off to Kopelke (Elm Street). "On May 20, 1891 Elmer Dwiggins sold lot 21, Block 14 in the town of Griffith to Mrs. R.S. Webner for \$250 to be paid in meal tickets on Webner's Lunch Room, 167 S. Wabash, Chicago, numbered 41-4100. When all said tickets are redeemed first party agrees to convey said lot by a good and

sufficient warranty deed, free from all incumberances."

This sale was typical of many made by the Dwiggins Brothers as they attempted to sell lots in the new town of Griffith sight unseen to people at the World's Fair of 1892 and other places.

In 1892 Ellis and Southworth built a store on the east side of Broad south of the tracks which housed the first Post Office. Later Southworth put up a 10' X 10' building next to the R.R. for a Post Office.

The Dwiggins' business venture in Griffith failed. An interesting but incomplete story lies between the lines of the abstracts of the property involved. In September, 1897, Wm. Osterhout sued J.R. Willard and Elmer and Jay Dwiggins for \$541,364.24 which he claimed they owed him. Their land, Oak Forest, Ridgewood, Manufactures, Homestead and Jolidon Additions, were attached. Osterhaut finally paid \$15,000 at Sheriff's Auction for the above lands. In 1899 Elmer and Jay Dwiggins, who were then in Buenos Aires, Argentina, gave their power of attorney to Robert Dwiggins to complete negotiations with Osterhout. After this the trail becomes confused by the death of Osterhout and various involvements concerning his estate.

In 1912 the Griffith Land Company (Christenson and de St. Aubin) formed and acquired the land between Broad and Cline, north of the tracks that Dwiggins had not owned.

Population in various years

1892-60 1910-200 1939-2,000 1940-2,500 1941-2,900

1945-3500 1950-4,470 1960-9,483

## Schools

North School - Located east side of Broad in 300 block built before 1891 - Miss Bennet teacher, part of building was moved into to town and used as a store - part was moved south of town to become South School

South School - 506 S. Broad St. moved to this location in 1892

Troy School - located on Reder Road near dump, Miss Lennertz teacher

Franklin School - present location - see article History of Griffith Schools

Excerpt from beginning of Abstracts from any lot in Original Town of Griffith, laid out by Dwiggins.

Abstract of Title to ----(location)

Made July 7, 1891

For

Jay Dwiggins & Co.

Ву

Amos Allman & Son

Abstractors Real Estate Agents Crown Point

U.S. Govt.

Letters Patent

to

State of Ind.

March 24, 1853

State of Ind.

State Patent

to

Jan. 20, 1854

Jos. Hoffman

Jacob Helfen

March 15, 1890

to

Elmer Dwiggins

RETIRED TEACHER RECALLS THE GOOD OLD DAYS

(Taken from Suburban Herald, Aug. 24, 61)

School bells will ring in a few days, but not as exuberantly as they did 59 years ago for one Griffith school teacher.

Those were the days--(the good old days?)--when a school teacher's job was not all teaching.

Miss Carrie Seberger, 80, a retired Griffith teacher, remembers ringing the bell at the old South School, 506 S. Broad St. every morning for five years, from 1902-07.

Part of that original building still stands, although well disguised from its former role. The one-room white frame structure topped with a belfry has been enlarged, has had new siding an has lost its belfry. It is an apartment building now.

According to reports from old residents, the South School was in existence from 1892 to 1911, when Franklin School's original four-room structure went up.

Children from St. John Township, and the area generally south of the Broad Street tracks attended the South School.

North School was in Calumet Township, about 300 block of north Broad St. Another school (Trøy) was located near the present town dump for a short period. Catholic youngsters would walk the four miles to St. Michael's school in Scherer-ville. In those days the roads were just mud.

Miss Seberger was born Jan. 16, 1881, in the house next to the one at 321 E. Clark Street, Crown Point, in which she has lived for 61 years. She graduated in 1900 from the old North Ward school there.

Her first teaching assignment was a tough one-three teachers had been hired and fired the year before at a small school in Winfield township because they couldn't handle the youngsters. Not only did Miss Seberger survive one year, but stayed two. "I got on the good side of the big boys," is her explanation. "I found out one of the worst of them liked astronomy so we worked with that and it brought him over to my side."

She left Winfield Township because she could get more money at Griffith and could get home every day. Winfield was paying \$35 a month, and room and board was costing her \$2 a week for Monday through Friday. In Griffith area (St. John Township), the pay was \$40 a month and she could ride the Erie milk train back and forth every day from Crown Point.

In THOSE days, a teacher had to be a versatile creature. She was her own janitress, was responsible for keeping the pot-bellied stove full of coal or wood to warm the place on cold days, had to attend monthly teachers' meetings, issue monthly report cards with "number" grades, prepare lessons for all subjects for all grades of one through eight.

"There was quite a bit of homework," she mused, trying to explain how she did it all.

Interior of the school was not elaborate. Miss Seberger calls it a wardrobe and one of her pupils, Mrs. Joe Miller (Rose Grimmer) labeled it a hall, but either way it was a place at the front of the building where students kept their clothing. Boys were on the left, girls on the right.

Mrs. Miller remembers a picture of a president decorated one wall, but she couldn't remember which president. Children

sat together in double desks fastened to the floor. This might have presented a discipline problem to some teachers, but not to Miss Seberger.

One example of discipline has stuck in Mrs. Miller's mind for the past 57 years concerned another pupil.

"Ed Miller was sitting two seats ahead of me. One day
he had his geography book up in front of his face so Miss
Seberger wouldn't see him chewing gum. She spotted him anyway, and came down the aisle so easy he never noticed her till
she was standing over him, "Give me that gum," she commanded.
What a surprised look on his face! He didn't waste any time
putting the gum in her hand."

School was held from September to the end of April or the first of May. A close schedule with the milk trains didn't allow much time to do any sightseeing in Griffith.

Miss Seberger said she never had occasion to travel farther north than the Erie tracks, so she has no memory of what buildings existed past Main Street. She did remember that in the railroad crossing area there were several stores, John Miller's saloon and hotel, Southworth's general store and Jake Miller's shoe store. The town was incorporated in 1904, and the town hall built in 1907.

The children's parents were mostly railroad employees and farmers. The smaller children wrote on slates. Sometimes Miss Seberger livened up the day with singing and playing the piano.

In 1907 she left Griffith to teach in the rough city of Gary. There were not very many women, but lots of saloons in the town which was just being developed. "My mother didn't

want me to go to a place like that," she added.

One of seven children, she came home to Crown Point each weekend. Her schedule was intricately arranged so she could take trains from Gary to Hammond and thence to Crown Point. Part of the way she was escorted by the marshall, and during the weeknights she stayed at the home of a school trustee.

At Tolleston in Gary she taught seventh and eight grade mathematics. Four years later, she switched to the new Froebel School, to stay for the next 33 years.

She retired in 1943, 18 years ago, and hasn't worked in a school since, "I never wanted to substitute," she stated. Over the years of teaching, she attended the University of Chicago, Indiana Extension and the training school for teachers at Ypsilanti, Michigan.

During retirement she keeps busy with taking care of the large house and garden, visiting friends and relatives, reading, and driving to see interesting points, "I'd be lost without a car," she sighed.

Pamphlet

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By Tovey, Margaret

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